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Abstract

This paper considers how vertical power dynamics play out in one English primary school classroom, based on a PhD study of young children's embodied school experiences. I consider how adults use vertical space to surveil and control, yet children can also use vertical space to their advantage by avoiding the surveilling gaze of adults. This paper elucidates the findings of part of a PhD study, namely that children can and do use their "lower down" position to resist adults' normative expectations of development and behaviour. This is especially applicable to children with a label of special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) who are considerably less powerful than the adults around them. Verticality is intimately tied to power relationships, and therefore to surveillance (Nemorin, 2017). It might seem obvious that adult-child relations "are vertically structured, with the adult in a dominant and the child in subordinated and dependent position" (Nordström, 2011). Yet, it remains valuable to consider the physical, embodied, assemblage-in-space ways in which verticality, such as literal height differences, plays a role in surveillance and resistance in the classroom.

I take the concept of "verticality" both as a metaphor and as a literal embodied experience. Firstly, I consider how child "development" is seen as a vertical process (Engeström, 1996). This normative understanding of development reinforces ideas of particular ways of becoming an adult (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011) which do not allow for a "normality of doing things differently" (Hansen and Philo, 2007). Therefore, children who do things "differently" are especially vulnerable to bodily surveillance in the classroom. Then I consider how adults use vertical space to try to control classroom assemblages. I particularly focus on the way adults use vertical space (Readdick and Bartlett, 1994) to display information (including photographs) about children labelled with SEND, and what this says about agency and representation in the classroom. Finally, I discuss how children resist adult power in the classroom (Gallagher, 2010) by using space in ways that adults might not expect or intend.

Introduction

The Reception classrooms of Harbour View Primary School[1] are typical of a British early years setting: the space is divided into distinct areas such as a reading corner and sand pit; in one corner there is an interactive whiteboard with speakers; and in another corner there is a cloakroom area for the children's coats. But as well as being divided in the horizontal plane, space is divided vertically too: at the lower levels there are activities on the floor, and child-sized desks and chairs set up for children to draw, paint and write. Above this, the walls have colourful displays demonstrating numbers, phonics and children's work; other notice-boards contain information for adults, such as lists of children with allergies or labels of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). For those familiar with similar environments, none of this is particularly note-worthy. Yet when we begin to analyse these everyday early childhood spaces, we can begin to make the familiar unfamiliar and

[1] The name of the school and of all participants have been anonymised..

question assumptions about space, bodies, power and resistance in the classroom. Specifically, this paper focuses on the (often overlooked) use of vertical space by adults to try to surveil and assert power and control, and how children use vertical space to their advantage by resisting the surveilling gaze of adults.

Vertical surveillance, space and developmental discourse

Verticality refers to the metaphorical relationship of "traditional" forms of surveillance in which those with more power surveil and control those with less (Nemorin, 2017). In that metaphor, those with more power are higher up and those with less are lower down; quite simply, "verticality and social power are closely linked" (Niedeggen *et al.,* 2017, no pagination). The school classroom is a classic example of a space of surveillance (Foucault, 1975), where adults hold power and surveil children: "adult-child relations in school are vertically structured, with the adult in a dominant and the child in subordinated and dependent position" (Nordström, 2011, p. 74). Recent literature in children's studies has taken an interest in power, surveillance and school spaces, considering how, in everyday school environments, surveillance is both enacted and resisted. This has included US-American boys of colour resisting oppression by "standin' tall" (itself linked to ideas of verticality and power) (Basile, 2018); incomplete surveillance in primary schools, allowing evasion and resistance (Gallagher, 2010); and troubling the idea of children's "docile" bodies by viewing power relationships as constantly shifting and negotiated (Pike, 2010). There remains, however, a gap in the specific understandings of how both adults and children use their metaphorical and physical vertical positioning to their advantage.

Child-adult relationships in the classroom are also strongly influenced by a pervasive, traditional idea of "development" in which children progress ever upwards "along a vertical dimension, from immaturity and incompetence toward maturity and competency" (Engeström, 1996, no pagination); in other words, children are on an inexorable climb upwards to adulthood. This normative understanding of development reinforces particular ways of becoming an adult, in which disabled children's bodies are "lacking" and not "normal" (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011). The powerful myth of "normal" bodies has been reinscribed and exploited to serve the nation-state, in which the school system contributes to creating docile, productive bodies (Davis, 1995). This does not allow for a "normality of doing things differently" (Hansen and Philo, 2007) in which children can find their own way of doing, being and becoming in a compassionate, supportive environment. Engeström (1996) suggests that we think beyond the developmental ladder, instead considering the potential to cross potentially stifling boundaries, opening outwards to myriad possibilities.

Methodology

The findings discussed here are one part of a PhD study exploring school spaces and disability. For six months I spent one day a week with early years pupils at a large inner-city primary school in northern England. My research was underpinned by the idea that we should listen to dis/abled children to understand their experiences, and take them seriously (Beresford, 1997, p.1), and that "listening" takes various forms, including communicating non-verbally. I was influenced by the Mosaic approach (Moss and Clark, 2017) and used various visual and creative methods. These included asking children to draw themselves, their school environment, and their interests; giving children the use of a tablet computer to take photographs of whatever they wanted in the classroom and playground; and conversations with children about their school, sometimes using their photos or drawings as prompts for discussion. This gave children a choice of methods to suit them (or the choice to not take part at all), and also had the advantage of building a fuller picture of classroom

life from different types of data. This gave children the opportunity to express themselves as experts in their own lives, who can consider the meaning of their own experiences (Moss and Clark, 2017). However, I was also mindful that no person is a fully autonomous, rational "subject" with perfect insight into their own behaviour (Stephens, Ruddick and McKeever, 2015). Therefore, my research also involved observing the classroom spaces, focusing on assemblages in space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and the material world without returning to pathologising accounts of disabled people's bodies (Feely, 2016). I tried to be critical and self-reflective, and I was never "just" observing, always recognising my role as an ever-present participant in the classroom space.

Findings

Many of my observations on the use of vertical space in the classroom came from re-reading and re-analysing my field notes. One such entry reads:

> I am sitting with [two pupils] as they make a car out of a large cardboard box and decorate it. They tell me they are best friends. One of them tells me that her mum has a baby in her belly. The other says that her mum was going to go into hospital to have a baby. [She says that she] used to be a baby but now [is] big [...] and holds her hand above her head to demonstrate this. [fieldnotes]

In this snapshot of typical classroom life, a 5-year-old demonstrated her understanding of getting older and becoming an adult: that she would become taller. It is usual to talk about "growing up" as though upwards growth is the most obvious differentiation between children and adults. Children often refer to adults as "grown-ups" as though their key trait is having finished growing. I reflected upon this in relation to my own embodied experience in the classroom as an adult, taller than all of the children. One of the earliest observations was:

> I enter the classroom at about 9.30 am and put my coat and bag in a tall cupboard, which also [contains] various other bags, stationary, snacks and miscellaneous other things that adults do not want the children to access. (adapted from field notes)

My first act in the class space reconfirmed my adult status: placing my personal belongings in a cupboard, thereby accessing a vertical space which only adults could use. This illustrates how the physical environment is designed to divide adults' spaces from children's spaces and to prevent children from crossing this divide. Adults using the cupboard know that items on the upper shelves were out of reach of children. This thereby created a physical separation and a space that is "adult only" by taking advantage of the height differences between children and adults, rather than using a barrier such as a door or wall, which might separate different parts of horizontal space. It might seem banal to say that children are shorter than adults: this is simply accepted as fact. Yet digging deeper troubles these basic assumptions about children's and adults' bodies and the power relationships they embody. It is therefore a good starting point to consider how vertical power relationships work in the classroom setting.

My ability to access higher spaces illustrates how children and adults live in different worlds in the same space (Opie and Opie, 1991; Christensen and James, 2017). We might believe that adults and children occupy the same physical space, even if their cultural worlds are different; yet only adults have access to the space above about 4 feet (120cm). Thus the classroom is bisected by an invisible, horizontal line that divides space that both adults and children can physically access, below, and space that only adults can physically access, above. This exemplifies the socially accepted power difference (and behaviour differences) between adults and children. Even though it was possible for children to open the cupboard and access items on the lower shelves, I never saw a child do this, and the adults were not concerned enough about this to lock the cupboard. This

suggests that the children did not open the cupboard because they knew it was an adults' space in an environment where they are used to adults controlling all aspects of their lives (Tisdall, 2003). In other words, adults exploited both their physical and metaphorical high position: the former, by using higher spaces to control what children had access to; and the latter, being safe in the knowledge that children knew the social rules and would not break them.

I have established that the early years classroom at Harbour View School is bisected horizontally, with adult space established, metaphorically and literally, in the upper part of the classroom. It has also been asserted that "traditionally, the locus of child play and learning has been the horizontal surfaces of early childhood classrooms--tabletops, desks and floors. Vertical surfaces have been reserved for adult decoration and direction of child activity" (Readdick and Bartlett, 1994, p. 86). I found a clear example of adult use of display boards at Harbour View to provide information intended for adults, especially regarding children labelled with SEND and for illustrating children's "progress" or "development". I will now discuss how adults use the vertical space of display boards to communicate silently to each other the importance of surveilling children and recording evidence of their development.

"Learning journeys"

The metaphorical understanding of development as a linear, upwards process was shown through a wall display in the classroom showing a series of photographs of a child using outdoor play equipment. It was titled "Ahmed's Learning Journey", borrowing a term used by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), an executive agency of the Department for Education, which provides a "robust testing, assessment and moderation system to measure and monitor pupils' progress and attainment through primary school from reception" onwards (Standards and Testing Agency, no year). Each photograph in Ahmed's learning journey had a caption written by an adult, along the lines of, "He climbs carefully down and back up again! (MH)". This explicitly links the photographs to the Early Learning Goals (ELGs), with "MH" referring to "ELG04: Moving and Handling":

> Children show good control and co-ordination in large and small movements. They move confidently in a range of ways, safely negotiating space. They handle equipment and tools effectively, including pencils for writing. (Standards and Testing Agency, 2014, p. 1).

This is just one of seventeen Early Learning Goals which show "the level of learning and development expected at the end of the EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage]"; and these types of photographs and (adult) comments on them are encouraged by the STA as evidence of children reaching said goals (STA, 2017). This clearly considers progress to be a linear, vertical process, with children metaphorically climbing towards a goal. There is also no acknowledgement that children's ability to achieve certain tasks (in this case, move through space in certain ways) is not an independent, individual skill, but is part of a complex, ever-changing assemblage involving multiple human and non-human actors (Feely, 2016; Stephens et al., 2015). This has particular significance for children with SEND labels: atypical co-ordination, balance, confidence and/or writing skills are considered to be incompatible with "growing up" normatively. Such children are placed, metaphorically, low down on the development ladder.

Furthermore, the placement of this learning journey at adult eye-level elevates its importance: its vertical positioning at this height reminds adults of their role in surveilling the children and photographing them to record their progress. It is a constant reminder, from adults to adults, that their vertical power over children is part of a higher power from the government, using its own various methods of surveillance to track the progress of schools on the basis of the progress of individual children. Yet despite this apparent concern with child development, and the minutiae and

complexity of the associated bureaucracy, it has been argued that the neo-liberal concern with preparing children primarily for future employment is creating an “emerging compliant professional with an increasingly compliant pedagogy, which may not be commensurate to supporting child development” (Leydon, 2019). Instead, it is one link in a vertical chain of power, in which children are surveilled by practitioners and practitioners are surveilled by government. Clearly, then, the photographs depicting Ahmed’s learning journey are not simply an observation or celebration of Ahmed enjoying playing. Nor is this a value-free celebration of a child’s achievement. Rather, it is explicitly linked to government-mandated goals forced upon early years practitioners from above.

Small acts of resistance

Despite children’s relative lack of power, there do find ways to disrupt and resist the vertical adult-child power dynamic, intentionally or otherwise, by exploiting their own position. Inaya, a child with a label of SEND, liked to lie on the floor. Adults considered this behaviour undesirable, and encouraged her to sit on the floor with the other children when the teacher was reading a story to the whole class. To sit with her legs crossed with the rest of the class was one goal on Inaya’s personalised timetable, which laid out how adults should communicate and interact with her to help her reach various goals. Yet it was unclear why this was important, other than to encourage normative behaviour. Inaya’s resistance took the form of getting as close to the ground as she could, physically; symbolically she was rejecting the “proper” way of sitting, with its uprightness and its association with more “grown-up” behaviour. Other disabled people have talked about the taboo of lying down in public: Sullivan Sanford, for example, describes her experience of “trying to inconspicuously lie on the floormat” (2006, p. 40), while Crow feels “censored” as she seeks hidden spaces to lie down in public (2017, p. 42). We might question why people feel that they have to be inconspicuous and hidden; perhaps we can imagine, and even try to create, a world where people's ways of “doing things differently” are normal (Hansen and Philo, 2007) but not homogenous, and where Inaya can lie down if she wants to; where, in Crow’s words, her lying down “opens up possibilities for celebrating the rebel body and finding a more curious way of living” (2017, p.47, see also Engeström, 1996). We should consider a world in which a disabled child’s choice to embrace low-down space is not discouraged in the name of creating upright, upstanding (or upsitting) citizens.

Children also exploited their vertical position in the classroom by resisting surveillance through literally turning the gaze of the camera upwards towards adults. Izobel, for example, took a striking photo in which an adult holds a tablet computer and looms over her, photographing her. Adults surveilled Izobel (and other disabled children) because of her position “low down” on the ladder. On one occasion, Izobel and I were playing and talking together. A practitioner suddenly interrupted to record evidence of Izobel meeting a communication goal (in other words, having a chat with me). (Incidentally, discreet observation from a distance, recorded in writing, is adequate for the purposes of the EYFSP). I have no doubt that this adult acted in good faith, and there is nothing wrong with celebrating the daily activities of children expressing themselves. However, the backdrop of normative development “goals”, enforced through statutory powers, made the moment quite hollow for me. It was a stark reminder of governmental pressures on schools and the resulting non-consensual, potentially damaging surveillance on children. Yet Izobel’s small act of resistance, turning the camera upwards to face the adult and the camera, showed her potential for agency in a position of relative powerlessness.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that children find themselves “low down” in terms of power in the early years classroom. This includes surveillance, overt and covert, to which certain children are particularly vulnerable. All adults interested in childhood and education - researchers, practitioners, policy-makers - should be concerned about this. After all, we are caught between two worlds: we see the everyday joys and sorrows of children being children, and we are aware of the possibilities that lie ahead of them; yet we are also crushed by the weight from above of a neo-liberal agenda that values evidence of upwards achievement (narrowly defined) beyond all else. But we should also be heartened by children’s acts of resistance, of opening up and pushing boundaries, and our own potential to question, trouble and disrupt dominant narratives of development and surveillance. In the case of this research, the disruption of the usual power dynamic came about as an unintended consequence of one method chosen to understand children’s views: photography. This was a vital reminder that I was not an objective outsider in this research; rather, my physical presence in the classroom made me part of the environment and my “high up” status (and resulting power) as an adult was ever-present. We cannot erase that power, but we can and must consider how we use it and for what ends.

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